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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES ELECTIONS WITH RIOS MONTT

Classified By: PolCouns David Lindwall for reason 1.5 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: In an October 29 breakfast with the Ambassador, FRG presidential candidate Rios Montt said he would respect the outcome of the election, whatever it is. He expressed concern about technical problems with the voter registration list ("padron") and locally organized acts of violence in the countryside against his campaign, but thought the election would be free and fair. Vice Presidential candidate Barrientos said that FRG optimism over their "expected electoral victory" is not based on polls (which have long shown the FRG in a distant third place), but rather on their contact with the masses. The Ambassador said that, should the FRG win the election, they would have an uphill battle proving to the international community that they represented change, and they would need to make an early priority of showing that they will promote human rights, fight corruption and transnational crime and engage on free trade. End summary.

2. (C) On October 29, the Ambassador, DCM and Political Counselor met over breakfast at the Residence with FRG candidate and former General Efraim Rios Montt, Vice Presidential Candidate Edin Barrientos and First Vice President of Congress (and daughter of Rios Montt) Zury Rios as part of a series of breakfasts with the leading presidential hopefuls. The General, who had not been in the Residence in a long time, was at ease, and the meeting was candid.

3. (C) Rios Montt said that the election campaign was going well and that he thought it would be free and fair. He expressed concern, however, that some opposition parties, at least at the local level, had promoted a climate of intolerance against his campaign and had stirred up crowds to keep him from holding rallies. He mentioned the incident in Rabinal in June and this week's incident in La Independencia, Huehuetenango (Note: The ex-PAC hostage incident began as an effort to prevent the FRG from holding a rally. End note) as examples. He added that he had concerns about the reliability of the voter registration list ("padron electoral"), noting that "serious problems" with the list of voters in San Miguel Petapa (a working class suburb of Guatemala City) which just came to light this week, revealed that some voters were shown as eligible to vote in numerous locations. While Rios Montt said he agreed with the Ambassador that the indelible ink and other safeguards are sufficient to see to it that this technical error by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) does not lead to double voting, he feared that the same error could lead to the exclusion of many eligible voters. (Comment: This later concern is real. A study just completed of the new "padron" by FLACSO, a highly reputed NGO, found that the list has flaws that might/might lead to the exclusion of some voters on election day. While voters will believe this is a political manipulation to keep them from voting, it appears to be simply a technical problem arising from the TSE's overhaul of the "padron." The problem should affect voters from every party equally.)

4. (C) The Ambassador commented that post-electoral violence, particularly at the municipal level, is a historical reality in Guatemala, and said the national leaders of the parties, therefore, have a responsibility to respect the outcome and ensure that their supporters do not engage in violence. Rios Montt said that the FRG respected the outcome in 1995 even when they were deprived of victory by a premeditated cut in the electrical power to the vote-counting center, which allowed the powers in control to alter the results (Comment: The electricity did/did go off -- for three hours. But international observers at that election doubted fraud occurred. End comment). He said they would respect the outcome this time, whatever it is. Rios Montt said that he and his party represent a vision for a new Guatemala, and not personal interests. If the people of Guatemala share that vision, they will elect him, he said. If not, he would accept that and move on. He argued that the election has nothing to do with his immunity from prosecution, saying that the Supreme Court (which is not controlled by Rios Montt), could lift his immunity at any time.

5. (C) Barrientos expressed confidence that the Guatemalan people would vote overwhelmingly for the FRG, and that they would win on the first round. When the Ambassador asked Barrientos what their polls were telling them, Barrientos dodged the question saying that the FRG's calculation of

victory comes from their contact with the masses (Note: President Portillo told the Ambassador that the FRG's polls show the FRG will have an uphill struggle to get into the second round. End note). Barrientos argued that the FRG had reached 700,000 people with their message during the campaign, and that that represented over two million votes. He further argued that during the past four years, the FRG government had benefited over 800,000 farmers with subsidized fertilizers. He extrapolated from that data that the FRG would have more than the 50% of valid votes necessary to win on the first round. Neither Rios Montt nor Zury Rios commented on the possible outcome of the election (Comment: Barrientos studiously avoided addressing the FRG's third-place ranking in all the polls. His suggestion that reaching 700,000 individuals with the FRG's message would translate into over two million votes for the FRG is too exaggerated to be self-delusion, and appears to be putting the best public face on a campaign that has encountered significant voter antipathy. End comment).

16. (C) The Ambassador told Rios Montt that we will respect the outcome of elections that are "clearly free and fair." Should Rios Montt win, he would have a difficult relationship with the international community, us included, and it was in his interest to move quickly to demonstrate his commitment to human rights, to control corruption and transnational crime and to engage on free trade. The Ambassador added that concerns about fraud and manipulation in this election made it imperative that the FRG not engage in behavior on election day that could cast doubts on whether the election was free and fair. Rios Montt acknowledged the point, said that he understood the importance of addressing the concerns of the international community, "especially the United States," but then lapsed into a defense of his "war on communism," arguing that international opposition to him was generated solely from the fact that he "defeated the communists." Rios Montt and Zury Rios criticized the corruption of senior advisors to the current government, implicitly distancing themselves from Portillo. Their impassioned indictment of government corruption and their claim that if elected they would put an end to corruption by prosecuting those who have abused of the resources of the state blithely ignored the fact that their party has been in charge of the government for the past four years and that the corrupt officials they are referring to were brought to power by their electoral victory in 1999.

17. (C) Comment: Rios Montt did not come across as a candidate who is fighting the defining battle of his political career. Even his complaints about violence against his rallies and the problems of the voter registration list were clearly not major concerns that he expected us to resolve. He does not appear to understand how controversial his "vision for Guatemala" is with many voters, but was up front is saying that if the voters don't buy it, he won't insist. With the exception of Barrientos' unconvincing account of how getting the FRG's message to voters would result in a first round victory (and damn the polls), there was no triumphalism in their expression. It was clear that, should they win, the FRG wants the assurance that there will be some level of engagement with the USG in areas of mutual interest. It was also clear that they still don't understand that the FRG can only repair its image with us and other members of the international community by facing honestly and openly the human rights violations of the war and the corruption of the current FRG government.

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